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ABSTRACT

A one-year University of Exeter program designed for foreign students of English is divided into two major components. The language component includes classes in reading and listening comprehension, essay writing, etymology, dialectology, semantics, and sociolinguistics. Four areas of language study that are typically challenging to foreign students and are provided for in the selection of texts are sociocultural convention and vocabulary, register, humor, and accent. The literature component has three principal emphases: sixteenth-century, nineteenth-century, and twentieth-century literature. The foreign students have lectures with university honors students but attend additional tutorials. The program is complemented by a series of talks on aspects of British life and culture by speakers from within and outside the university, and trips to places of historical interest are taken frequently. The examinations conform to university regulations and are generally traditional, but alternative means of assessment more appropriate for the foreign student group are used when feasible. Students not interested in the literature component can substitute other university courses, and equivalence examinations are given. The program is limited to 16-20 students a year, entry is competitive, and the syllabus is flexible. Teaching methods are a combination of traditional and contemporary approaches. (MSE)

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SPECIAL PURPOSE ENGLISH: LEARNING
ABOUT THE LANGUAGE*

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Special purpose English: learning about the language*

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The Junior Year Abroad is a concept well established in the United States of America, but much less so in Britain, except in the case of students of modern languages who are, generally, obliged to spend a year or part of a year in a country of the language of their studies. At the University Exeter, we offer a course, rather quaintly entitled the *Testamur in English Language and Literature*, catering for students majoring in English Language and/or Literature, who wish to spend a year in a British university to complement their studies at home. Entry to this course is normally restricted to students, then, who are studying English Language and Literature in a non-English-speaking environment, at undergraduate level, and who have completed at least one year of university-level study. Such students are, for the most part, *intrinsically motivated* towards English and, in my experience, are much less concerned about the vocational implications of their studies than about the content of the programme itself. Many of the students we have taught on the course are "language freaks" who read voraciously, devour vocabulary and quite simply have a fascination for words.

Our course is divided into two major components: English Language and English Literature.

The English Language component comprises classes in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, essay writing, etymology, dialectology, semantics and sociolinguistics. For the reading comprehension element, students are presented with a fairly lengthy text each week, for preparation and detailed study in small tutorial groups. The collection of fifty texts has been compiled for course use by myself and two colleagues, and each text presents features of linguistic, cultural, attitudinal (tonal), historical or social interest, in addition to some very abstruse vocabulary usage. Our sources range from early twentieth-century novels to modern journalistic pieces (from, e.g., *Punch*, *Encounter*, *Highlife*, the *New Statesman*, *The Listener*, *The Times* or *The Guardian*). We are constantly on the lookout for pieces to add to our collection, and it is revised each year. Content this year has ranged from discussions on the

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role of bishops in the House of Lords to the varieties of barbecue equipment available commercially, fishing, folk customs, neo-Darwinism, Ireland, video games ... indeed, a whole gamut of topics, each one providing students with insights into aspects of English language and the life and culture of Britain and other English-speaking countries. A particular feature which influences our selection of texts is the fact that they should contain a significant amount of material which is sufficiently difficult as to challenge even the best of our students - some of whom appear almost bilingual, but whose deeper cultural appreciation of English is often lacking - and, moreover, material which cannot be sufficiently explicated merely by consultation of a dictionary. In order to prepare their texts for class discussion, students are encouraged to consult reference books and other library materials, works of literature, (educated) native speakers of English and also to go farther afield than the University campus to seek information, for instance, to the local museum, art gallery, shops or information centres. What always emerges in class is students' surprise that native speakers have often not been able to assist them; secondly, students are often amazed at how inadequate a dictionary can be in helping them elucidate a text. Their previous experience with class texts has generally been at a word level: everything could be found in a standard dictionary, and for many the challenge of having to roam around other reference sources is an exciting and inspiring one (for a few, of course, it is frustrating, but often the source of their frustration lies in not being familiar with alternative sources of information, and not knowing where to go to find the information they need.)

We have identified four major areas as ones which provide constructive challenges to students at the Testamur level: socio-cultural convention and vocabulary; register; humour; and accent. The texts for reading comprehension contain a wide variety of examples of register, social comment, allusions and conventional use; in addition, many of the texts are humorous, ironic or satirical. Such are those which, in our experience, have provided the students with the greatest difficulty, as well as, perhaps, the greatest insights into the language and way of thought of English speakers. Humour, for example, ranges from individual puns to whole-text comments on society.

Accent, as well as aspects of register and socio-cultural convention, are dealt with in the listening comprehension classes, which also take place in small tutorial groups. Here, students are exposed to a variety of accents of native English speakers from different parts of the world, with a number of widely

differing contexts and topics. Students have to identify patterns of intonation, grammar and morphology as well as accent and they are sensitised towards those features of speech which native speakers regard as significant, i.e., not necessarily simply the individual lexical or structural items, but the meaning-bearing supra-segmental features.

Essay writing classes are text-based. Students are offered a short text which presents a moral dilemma, a topical argument, a principle or something, and, after a series of procedures, both oral and written, to establish that the text has been understood, are invited to write an essay on a related theme. Essays are evaluated on content and language, in a rather traditional way. We believe there is considerable virtue in asking students at this level to discipline themselves to write concisely and coherently on a given theme or topic, and so essays are given under conditions of time constraint, which become stricter as the year progresses.

Classes in etymology concentrate on English word morphology, with particular emphasis on the Latin and Greek elements in the language. The aim of these classes is to give students an awareness of the extent to which Latin and Greek are present in modern English, and to develop their reading strategies through giving them enhanced knowledge and skills with which they can approach unfamiliar items in context and make informed guesses as to meaning.

The classes in dialectology examine the ways in which authors have, through the centuries, used dialectal features in their works. An examination is made of a number of literary sources where the representation of dialect and accent has been made in a variety of ways; the features of rural and social ways of speech are discussed and exemplified, both from a phonological and an orthographical point of view. A study is made of the significance of the various representations of dialect, and the social connotations of each within the context of the works themselves and the periods in which they were written.

Classes in semantics concentrate on the developing students' awareness of connotation as well as denotation, and aim at increasing students' perceptiveness of the significance of choice in language, i.e., the semantic implications of the selection of one or other word or phrase over another. Particular attention is given to the phenomena of synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy in English.

The classes in sociolinguistics lay stress on the significance of variety in English, and students are encouraged to discover for themselves the ramifications of this. Each group of students prepares an experiment involving some fieldwork, often in the streets of the city, and is responsible for collecting and analysing the results of a fairly straightforward piece of data collection, for instance involving acceptability, or phonological or lexical exponents of region, occupation or class. These simple experiences give the students practice in experimental method, as well as insights into features of natural language use rarely highlighted in E.F.L. classes or textbooks.

The English Literature component has three principal strands: sixteenth-century, nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literature. The lecture classes are shared with British honours degree students in the School of English, but the Testamur students have one tutorial a week for each literary period. The sixteenth-century element offers a study of six works by Shakespeare together with *Revenge Tragedy* with, for example, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Particular stress is laid upon the dramatic themes and the social, historical and dramatic background to the works studied. The nineteenth-century and twentieth-century elements offer a wide range of novels, plays and poems for study, and each group can make its own selection of texts for study. The main twentieth-century text for 1987, for example, is E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the study of which is linked to elements within the sociolinguistics and dialectology classes, where features of Indian English are discussed and exemplified.

The whole course is complemented by a weekly series of talks by invited speakers from within and outside the University, on aspects of British life and culture. Examples of such subjects in the past have been "The Irish question," "Shakespeare's minor characters," "The English country house," "Religion in Britain," "Education in Britain," "How Parliament works," "British eating habits," "The rôle B.B.C. and its pronunciation policy". Regular trips and excursions to places of literary and historical interest, within a reasonable distance of Exeter are made, for example to Bath, Wells, South Wales (the Welsh National Folk Museum at St Fagan's), the castles of Gwent, North Cornwall, Dartmoor. At least one trip is made to Stratford-upon-Avon to see a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and students are encouraged to become members of the

National Trust so that they can visit the large number of historic buildings held by the Trust in England and Wales.

Because the Testamur is a formal University qualification, the examinations must conform to existing University norms, which, at present, are somewhat old-fashioned. However, there is opportunity for flexibility, and the staff responsible for the Testamur course are looking into alternative ways of assessment to the traditional written examinations. Conscious of the move towards student-centredness, which we attempt to reflect in our teaching, we are working towards ways of incorporating this philosophy in our assessment procedures, particularly in the way we evaluate literary appreciation.

Students who do not wish to follow any or part of the literature component are free to select one or two other subjects from within the University's curriculum as substitutes. Arrangements are made for equivalences to be given in examinations, and the subjects taken instead of the literary component are inscribed on the successful students' certificates. Students have taken, for example, biology, classics, computer science, French, geography, German, history, Islamic studies, Italian, Spanish, and theology instead of all or part of the literature component of the Testamur; for these subjects, they are incorporated into the regular classes given to British students reading for their first degrees, and no concession is made to their not being native-speakers of English. For this reason, only those students deemed capable of following such courses are allowed to do so, and some prior acquaintance with the subject is normally a prerequisite for admission to them.

A deliberate attempt is made on this course to marry the most modern approaches to the teaching of English language and literature with the more traditional. This is not a marriage of convenience: we believe that our students, whose specialisation in English and whose motivation for study in the language differ greatly from those of the majority of people who study E.F.L. demand a particular orientation, that of learning the language not only through formal and informal contact with it in class and outside, but by learning *about* the language - something that has been eschewed in purely extrinsically motivated language classes for some time. Our aim is that our students should leave our course not only better speakers and writers of English than they were when they came to us, but better informed about how the language works and about the cultural background it is associated with, particularly, but certainly not exclusively, the

literary culture. During the year, within the evident constraints of time and logistics, we endeavour to accommodate students' requests, and hold regular feedback sessions between staff and student representatives.

The Testamur course has no more than 16-20 students each year - competition for entry is extremely keen - are therefore we can be very flexible in our approach to the syllabus. Certainly, there is a marked maturity of thought manifest in students' suggestions as the year progresses and as they become familiar with our approaches, and there a sense of teamwork between staff and students in the development of the course itself.

* The substance of this description was given as a presentation at the 20th Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages held in Anaheim, California in March, 1986, and revised as "Teaching the language through teaching about the language," for presentation as the 20th annual conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, held in Brighton, England, in April, 1986. (See *I.A.T.E.F.L. Newsletter*, 92 (1986), 38-40)